

WALKING ON THE WATER IN INDIAN LITERATURE

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II. WALKING ON WATER IN THE NON-CHRISTIAN LITERATURE OF
WESTERN ASIA AND EUROPE

In the literature of western Asia and of Europe, as far as my observation extends, stories illustrating the magical crossing of water set their scenes in Egypt, western Asia, or India. I speak, of course, only of stories that are pre-Christian or seem to be so. An exception must be made in favor of Poseidon in the opening of Iliad XIII, who drives his chariot across the waves, much as at a later time did King Dilīpa in the Mahābhārata (see above, footnote 3). The deed of Poseidon might possibly be thrown out of court because he, being god of the sea, is by definition its master and may proceed at pleasure on its surface or under it. Yet the incident could not be so lightly brushed aside if it could be shown to be connected with other legends of crossing water magically. Such too, is the case with the later stories of water sprites, wraiths, ghosts which are adduced by Saintyves.⁴⁴ Such creatures, being bodiless or immaterial, may also glide across the water or float through the air. The pre-Christian belief in such beings is attested by the very story of Jesus walking on the water; for when his disciples saw him, they did not know him, but mistook him for a ghost and were frightened. There is after all nothing magical in the actions of these unreal creatures any more than there is in that of Poseidon; the magic part is a part of their nature; and the stories would be germane to our investigation only if it seemed that they had in any way inspired the stories that portray men performing the miracle.

The stories west of India are not so easily based upon definite

⁴⁴Essay on the miracle of crossing water in *Essais de folklore biblique*.

metaphysical notions as in India, but they may be assorted according to the manner in which the crossing is effected. There is one group in which the waters divide, another in which they are lowered, and a third in which there is walking on water. Obviously, there is no need to consider stories such as that of Icarus in which crossing the water is purely incidental to some other motif—in that case the motif of flying to heaven and too near the sun.

A. THE WATERS DIVIDE

The dividing of the waters so that it is possible to pass between them on dry land is characteristically a Jewish notion. It appears in connection with the exodus from Egypt, the entry into Canaan under Joshua, and the miracles of Elijah and Elisha. The oldest, and the source of the others, is that of Moses conducting the Israelites through the Red Sea.

And Jehovah said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward. And lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thy hand over the sea and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground. . . . And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and Jehovah caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. . . . And Jehovah said unto Moses, Stretch out thy hand over the sea, that the waters may come again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen. And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled against it; and Jehovah overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, even all the host of Pharaoh that went in after them into the sea; there remained not so much as one of them. But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.—Exodus xiv. 15-29, with some omissions.

This account is generally taken as a hybrid: one version shows the crossing effected by having the waters divide through the magic

power of Moses' rod; the other and older, rationalistically, by an east wind that drives the water back, apparently leaving the ground dry without division of the waters.

Inspired by this legend is that of Joshua leading the Israelites through the Jordan.

And Jehovah said unto Joshua, This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. And thou shalt command the priests that bear the ark of the covenant, saying, When ye are come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, ye shall stand still in the Jordan. And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, Come hither, and hear the words of Jehovah your God. And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you, . . . Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into the Jordan. Now therefore take you twelve men out of the tribes of Israel, for every tribe a man. And it shall come to pass, when the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of Jehovah, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, even the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand in one heap. And it came to pass, when the people removed from their tents, to pass over the Jordan, the priests that bare the ark of the covenant being before the people; and when they that bare the ark were come unto the Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (for the Jordan overfloweth all its banks all the time of the harvest), that the waters which came down from above stood, and rose up in one heap, a great way off, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan; and those that went down toward the sea of Arabah, even the Salt Sea, were wholly cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho. And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of Jehovah stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel passed over on dry ground, until all the nation were passed clean over the Jordan. And it came to pass, when all the nation were clean passed over the Jordan, that Jehovah spake unto Joshua, saying, Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, and command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of the Jordan, out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm, twelve stones and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night. Then Joshua called the twelve men, whom he had prepared of the children of Israel, out of every tribe a man: and Joshua said unto them, Pass over before the ark of

Jehovah your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take you up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel; that this may be a sign among you, that, when your children ask you in time to come, saying, What mean ye by these stones? then ye shall say unto them, Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of Jehovah; when it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off: and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel forever. And the children of Israel did so as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, as Jehovah spake unto Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel; and they carried them over with them unto the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests that bare the ark of the covenant stood: and they are there unto this day. For the priests that bare the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan, until everything was finished that Jehovah commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua: and the people hastened and passed over. And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of Jehovah passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people. . . . On that day Jehovah magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life. And Jehovah spake unto Joshua, saying, Command the priests that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of the Jordan. Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of the Jordan. And it came to pass, when the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of Jehovah were come up out of the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up unto the dry ground, that the waters of the Jordan returned unto their place, and went over all its banks, as aforetime.—Joshua iii. 7—iv. 18, with some omissions.

This long story is not merely an account of how the Israelites crossed the Jordan through the magic power of the ark of the covenant, but also a "just so" explanation of how the twelve stones came to be set up in Gilgal (Joshua iv. 20).

The third Jewish legend is of Elijah crossing the Jordan before his translation to heaven. He seems to cross it at the spot where the Israelites crossed it under Joshua, for he proceeds from Gilgal to Jericho to the river, reversing the route of their entry.

And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither,

so that they two went over on dry ground. And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I am taken from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, which parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up in a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof! And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is Jehovah, the God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they were divided hither and thither, and Elisha went over.—II Kings ii. 8-14.

In all three of these stories the miracle is accomplished by a simple and unreflective bit of folk magic. Certain articles have acquired a magic power, by means of which this and other wonders are achieved. The power does not lie in the individual wielding the articles; there is no higher religious basis for it, no doctrinal authority; nothing but the commonest and most elementary ideas of magic.

This group of legends in the Old Testament is not, as far as I can see, to be traced back to any other stories of crossing water magically. As a group they are independent.⁴⁵ But they have had influence on many later legends, one of which is old enough to come under our inspection. This is a Zoroastrian tale found in Yasht 5. 76-78, the Ardvišūr Yašt, a text which the vicissitudes of the Zoroastrian canon have made undatable, although it would not be unconservative to put it before the Christian era. Vistara, having escaped the massacre of his family, arrives at the river Vītaṇuhaitī; and there he invokes Ardvi Sūra Anāhita.

⁴⁵ It seems to me to be futile to try to connect these legends with the ancient Egyptian tale of King Snefru and his magician Zazamonkh. A convenient English rendering appears in Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, translated from the German by A. M. Blackman (New York: Dutton, 1927), pp. 38ff. One of the girl rowers of King Snefru's barge loses a malachite ornament in the water. The magician Zazamonkh lifts up the water from one side in a block, which he piles upon the water of the other side, recovers the ornament, and then replaces the water. The motivation and incidents are too dissimilar to justify making a connection.

"This is truly, veraciously stated, O mighty, immaculate Ardvī, that as many demon worshippers have been stricken to the ground by me as I have hairs on my head. Therefore, O mighty, immaculate Ardvī provide me then a dry passage over the good Vītanuhaitī."

Up came the mighty, immaculate Ardvī in the form of a beauteous maiden, very strong . . . ⁴⁶ The waters on one side she made stand still, the others she made flow on. She provided him a dry passage over the good Vītanuhaitī.⁴⁷

Two features of this legend are noteworthy. First, the manner of crossing is between divided waters as in the Hebrew crossing of the Red Sea, or even better that of the Jordan, where, as here, the upper waters stood still, and the lower flowed on. To this degree, therefore, it seems influenced by the Jewish legends; and the borrowing may well have taken place at the time when the Jews were in captivity at Babylon. The Zoroastrain could scarcely be the source of the Hebrew. For one thing we have no evidence that it is as old as the Hebrew; and for another the Hebrew story of the Exodus has such a hold on the Jewish imagination, both in the Old Testament and in the New, as well as in commemorative celebration down to the present that it seems more likely to have been the original than does the Zoroastrian, which cuts very little figure in its environment.

Second, the crossing is by means of prayer, in which respect it differs from the Hebrew. The form in which the prayer is made is almost the formula of the Hindu Act of Truth (see above section "I. B."), and might afford basis for believing that the Zoroastrian tale is partly traceable to Indian sources. The theory would find further support of a negative character in the fact that such a magic use of the truth does not seem to be characteristically Zoroastrian, as it is Hindu or Buddhist or Jain. These considerations are not conclusive, since the Iranian story itself is not to be derived from any Indian story I have seen. Two other explanations offer themselves. Such a use of the truth may be common Indo-Iranian, and may have been preserved independently in the two branches. This is hardly likely on account of two considerations: first, the great infrequency of the idea among the Iranians and second, its relatively late appearance in Indian literature. In the latter it seems to be a development from other notions (see above). The second explanation

⁴⁶Omitting a stock description of Ardvī.

⁴⁷Translation following Wolff, *Avesta . . . übersetzt*, p. 175.

is that it is also an Iranian development from other indigenous notions. In Zoroastrianism, as in the religion of the Veda, prayer as the due repetition of formulae has a magic power.⁴⁸ To cross a river in such circumstances one might well resort to prayer, as did Zarathushtra in a story which we shall consider a little later.⁴⁹ Also, the act by which Vistarav influences the goddess is one of the greatest piety, namely, the slaughter of demon worshippers, and it may well be the piety of his act more than the truthfulness of the statement that is effective. The question, however, had perhaps better be left unanswered.

An echo of the crossing of the Jordan from about the time of Christ is reported by Josephus, *Antiquities* XX.5.2, concerning a certain Theudas, who induced a large number of people to follow him to the Jordan, claiming that he was a prophet and would divide the waters. But when the test came, the miracle did not take place; so Theudas was captured and carried to the governor in Jerusalem, who had his head struck off.

B. THE WATERS BECOME SHALLOW

The stories of rivers or bodies of water suddenly becoming fordable are in western Asia invariably attached to historical personages, and in many cases seem more credible than does the story of crossing the Sutudrī and Vipās in Rigveda 3.33. Some of them seem to have a germ of truth in them, that is, a general with his army found a river, usually the Euphrates, fordable at a time of the year when it usually is not; this lucky coincidence was interpreted as a bit of heavenly favor, and the occurrence was transmuted into a miracle. The whole process is illustrated in Xenophon's *Anabasis* 1.4, when Cyrus and his army crossed the Euphrates at Thapsacus.

And in the crossing, no one was wetted above the breast by the water. The people of Thapsacus said that this river had never been passable on foot except at this time, but only by boats. . . . It seemed, accordingly, that there was divine intervention, and that the river had plainly retired before Cyrus because he was destined to be king.

If this were so, then heaven was merely trying to make mad him whom it meant ultimately to destroy. But the statement of the Thapsacans was not altogether true, "since in the late autumn and

⁴⁸See Moulton, *The Treasure of the Magi*, pp. 89 ff.

⁴⁹For a few references to crossing a river by means of religious act, performed or implied, and even of prayer, see in Jackson, *Zoroaster* p. 40, n. 6.

early winter the river is often fordable. It is to be remembered, however, that the Greeks crossed between the middle and the end of July, at a time when the river is usually at flood height. From the end of May until towards the middle of July the waters stand about thirteen feet above low water."⁵⁰ One hardly likes to impugn Xenophon's reliability concerning an occurrence of which he was presumably an eye-witness, and it is not necessary to do so. We need only suppose that the river subsided a little earlier that year; hence the lucky accident that is on the way to becoming a miracle.

But we need not be so charitable in our judgment of a legend concerning Lucullus that appears in Plutarch's life of him (24). Lucullus reached the Euphrates at a time when it was greatly swollen by late rains. But that very evening the floods began to subside and the next morning the river was lower than normal, showing islands that were seldom visible at all. The intervention of the deity in his behalf was evident from the fact that on the opposite bank waiting for him to take and sacrifice was a heifer sacred to the Persian Diana, an animal that Plutarch tells us was as a rule difficult to find. Here the incident, if it ever occurred, has been exaggerated and expanded into a modest miracle.

Tacitus (Annals 6.37) tells how Vitellius made a similar crossing of this singularly accommodating river. The final effect of these legends is to leave one a little incredulous of them all. It looks very much as though some ancient legend of crossing the Euphrates—perhaps akin to the story of Vistarav—had colored the accounts of the historians.

Alexander, the hero of much fairy tale, figures in some marvellous affairs with the waters, of which one is the passage of the sea in Pamphylia. Most of the accounts are touched with credibility. Arrian in his *Anabasis of Alexander* 1.26 says that there is no passage along the beach except when the north wind blows: "at that time, after a strong south wind, the north winds blew, and rendered his passage easy and quick, not without divine intervention, as both he and his men interpreted." Plutarch in his life of Alexander (17) refers to the same legend and quotes Menander in connection with it, but adds that Alexander himself made no claim of anything miraculous in the passage. Appian also knew the

⁵⁰Mather and Hewitt, *Xenophon's Anabasis*, Books I-IV, p. 267, quoting from Rogers, *History of Babylonia and Assyria*.

legend and in his Civil Wars 2.149, 150, mentions it in connection with an adventure of Caesar's in the Ionian Sea; and Strabo, in Geogr. XIV.3.9, says the army was a whole day in passing and was in water up to the navel. Callisthenes, however, according to Eustathius (notes on 3rd Iliad of Homer) says that the sea not only opened for him but even rose and fell in homage, although it is only fair to say that this statement is not necessarily to be interpreted thus literally but may be looked upon as a kind of rhetorical embellishment to something which was actually understood more prosaically. Josephus gives the event an undeniably miraculous touch. In the Antiquities II.16.5, having just described the Hebrew crossing of the Red Sea, he cites this legend in confirmation of that in Exodus, and says that the sea divided for Alexander, in an off-hand way referring to the other historians as his authority. The legend is probably independent of any other, being based on an unusual but perfectly natural occurrence, to which later commentators added miraculous interpretation. In the case of Josephus' account, it has been clearly contaminated by the Hebrew legend.

C. WALKING ON THE WATER

There are in the West no stories of actually crossing on the surface of the water that can be convincingly ascribed to pre-Christian times, nor even any allusions to the feat at so early a date. Nevertheless there are at least three stories which *might* be that old, if we only knew, and these it is worth while to mention.

The first concerns Alexander again, and is found in the Pseudo-Callisthenes.⁵¹ When Alexander arrived at Babylon, he himself went in disguise as an ambassador to Darius, who received and entertained him, notably with a banquet in the evening. During the course of the banquet a certain Persian lord recognized Alexander and informed Darius; whereupon Alexander, finding himself discovered, fled from the hall, snatching a torch to light him through the darkness. Fortunately, he chanced upon a horse at the door. The Syriac text then says, "Now Alexander by the might of the Gods crossed the river, but when he had reached the other side and the fore-feet of the horse rested on dry land, the water which had been frozen over suddenly melted, and the hind legs of the horse went down into the river. Alexander, however, leaped from the horse to land, and the horse was drowned in the river."

⁵¹Greek version, Book II.15; Syriac, Book II.7. The latter is translated by Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great*, p. 74.

This story, being about Alexander and appearing among the fairy tales of the Pseudo-Callisthenes, is at once to be suspected of Indian origin. It might, on the one hand, be a reflection of the Indian stories of magically crossing on the surface of the water, as by King Kappina and Queen Anoja (above in section "I. B.") or by King Dilīpa (footnote 3); or, on the other hand, of Siddhārtha's celebrated leap across the river Anomā on his steed Kanthaka, when he left home on the Great Retirement to become the Buddha.⁵² The age of the earliest version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes is probably not greater than 200 A. D.,⁵³ and no text that we have reproduces the original; yet this incident must be of considerable antiquity, for it is well established in the cycle; and it may even be pre-Christian.

The second story appears in Nonnus, Dionysiaca 23. Although Nonnus flourished about 395-405 A. D.,⁵⁴ the legend of a mythical invasion of India by Dionysus, carrying civilization to that country, is pre-Christian. As early as Euripides (prologue to the *Bacchae*), myth had carried him as far as Bactria, which at that time was both culturally and politically Indian.

Leaving the Lydian and the Phrygian plain
Teeming with gold, I neared the sun-scorched tracts
Of Persia and the walls of Bactria.⁵⁵

Arrian, *Indica* 5, 7, 8, 9, reports the invasion, presumably on the authority of Megasthenes, although he says nothing about crossing rivers on the surface of the water. Nonnus, however, uses this, as well as other material which seems attributable, perhaps indirectly, to Indian sources, such, for example, as his distortion of the Indian notions of rebirth (37.3). The incident that interests us is related in a florid, decadent style, with embellishments that doubtless originated with Nonnus, but the substance of it is that the bacchantes, having triumphed over the eastern barbarians, cross the river Hydaspes (the modern Jhelum, the river at which Alexander met Porus) with various nautical wonders. They drive their chariots over the waves, and the feet of the leopards do not sink in:

⁵²This incident is thoroughly commonplace among the Buddhists; for a convenient example, see in the *Nidānakathā*, translated by Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, p. 65. Hardly germane are stories of horses that run on water, as in the 1001 Nights, or that go so swiftly they do not sink in water, as in *Jātakas* 254 and 545.

⁵³See Budge, *op. cit.*, p. lii.

⁵⁴See Chamberlayne in the North Carolina University *Studies in Philology* 13.41.

⁵⁵See Davis, *The Asiatic Dionysus*, p. 163.

Pan's goat feet run over the waters, which flatten themselves out; and so with many others of Dionysus' army. Similar incidents occur in Nonnus' chapter 24. These incidents all seem quite reasonably to be ascribable to Indian sources, both on account of the nature of the crossing of the water, as well as on account of the Indian setting.

The third story is from a still later text, being an Iranian legend about Zarathushtra, appearing in the Zerdusht Nama, chapter 17, dated 1278 A. D. It tells how Zarathushtra, having arrived with his family at the bank of the Araxes, found no boat. He was grieved lest his wives should be exposed naked to the gaze of the multitude on shore; but he prayed to the Lord, and then they all walked across safely on the water. What the age of this tradition is, no one can hope to guess; for the books of the Parsis suffered such destruction that much original or early material no longer is preserved and we cannot check late reports, such as this, by the first canon. The fact that Zarathushtra and his family *walked on the surface of the water* would lend plausibility to the theory that Indian influence is felt here.

D. SUMMARY

So far as concerns the theme of walking on water, the conclusions to be drawn from our discussion of crossing water magically in western Asia are largely negative. The oldest legends show the waters dividing under the control of a magic object; this is varied by prayer; or, again, the waters are lowered. There are no stories exhibiting walking on the surface of the water which can with assurance be considered pre-Christian, while the few which may not unreasonably be so seem with great plausibility to be ascribable to Indian origins.